

A Framework for Change

**Aims and Objectives for an
Independent Isle of Wight Council**

April 16th 2013

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Introduction

Independent Councillors have demonstrated over the last four years that it is possible for those with different political beliefs to work together to develop and promote policies and strategies with one uniting aim. That aim is to benefit the Isle of Wight as a whole, without having to be subject to Party Political ambitions or National Party policy.

Independent led Budget proposals have proved to be lawful and balanced alternatives to the cutting agenda of the current Ruling Group. If implemented would have prevented much of the pain and unhappiness visited on the Island over the last six years.

This document sets out an agenda for change. It hopefully provides voters in the forthcoming Council election with the information they need to understand what Independents will do if they control the Council after May 2nd.

The background

An Independent led Isle of Wight Council will be very different from previous councils, including those that had Independents in their number, such as Island First.

True Independents will adhere to the Bell Principles of Independent Politics and, as such, will:

- Abide wholeheartedly by the spirit and letter of the Seven Principles of Public Life set out by Lord Nolan in 1995: *selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership*
- Be guided by considered evidence, our real world experience and expertise, our constituencies and our consciences
- Be free from the control of any political party, pressure group or whip
- Be non-discriminatory, ethical and committed to pluralism
- Make decisions transparently and openly at every stage and level of the political process, enabling people to see how decisions are made and the evidence on which they are based
- Listen, consulting our communities constantly and innovatively
- Treat political opponents with courtesy and respect, challenging them when we believe they are wrong, and agreeing with them when we believe they are right
- Resist abuses of power and patronage and promote democracy at every level
- Work with other elected Independents as a Group with a chosen spokesperson
- Claim expenses, salaries and compensation openly so the public can judge the value for money of our activities.

Island Independents have worked hard to establish new rules for any future Independent controlled council. These are set out overleaf and will guide all truly Independent councillors going forward.

Each Island Independent candidate has promised:

1. *To represent and further the best interests of my ward as a whole, being accountable only to my residents, whether they voted for me or not placing this above all other considerations.*
2. *Not to be subject to any form of whip or discipline in respect of my voting decisions.*
3. *To actively support the election of a leader of the council, cabinet members and chairs and members of committees, by the full council without any whip and work to achieve this if elected.*
4. *To actively support the establishment of working parties and select committees. This to provide truly impartial, transparent scrutiny and challenge both for policy and decision making; delegated and non-delegated.*
5. *Not to join or form any pacts or alliances with any political party or leader thereof that compromises my independence or causes me to break any of the aforementioned promises.*
6. *That if I fail to maintain my independence in this way, having been elected as an independent, I will immediately resign my seat.*

This means that where these Independent Councillors are in the majority, Party Politics cannot take over the running of the council and policy will be determined through select committees and a transparent and democratic process that means all councillors are involved and proper scrutiny can be applied before decisions are made, rather than in retrospect as is currently the case.

Under this process there will be far fewer delegated decisions and we will see an end to controversial and strategically important decisions being made behind closed doors.

However, we recognise and welcome the input of Party Political councillors of all parties and will run the Council on a consensus basis that gives everyone a say and ensures that residents are represented fairly throughout the Council. In this way we will say goodbye to the dictatorial and bureaucratic style of leadership that has characterised the current Council.

The Ruling Group, in isolation from the membership of the Council, presently decides policy. Senior officers and Cabinet Members agree on the policies and then these are presented, often as a fait accompli to the members at Full Council, having been scrutinised by panels chaired and populated by a majority of the Ruling Group. This has turned the process of putting motions before the Full Council into no more than a rubber-stamping exercise and has resulted in some of the worst decisions made by any Isle of Wight Council, in living memory.

By reintroducing an open and transparent style of local government we will change this completely and allow all members to play a part in addressing the serious problems that we face going forward. Where elected members have signed up to the Island Independents pledge this will accordingly bring decision making closer to residents.

This change to our process is vital as it is only by organising the Council properly that we can ensure that policy is built and decisions are taken that truly reflect the will of the people, rather than the will of the Ruling Group.

This is what it means to put People Before Politics.

The Challenges and Priorities

In the first year we undertake to work within the overall budget limits set by the previous council. That is not to say that we will be forced to continue with their policies or priorities. However, we need to better understand the financial context in which we will be operating. This means identifying the challenges and outlining our priorities through a root and branch review of all services.

Nonetheless, in the event that the decision is taken to break up the Coastal Protection Team, we will if elected with a sufficient majority, reinstate that team and then review its effectiveness with a view to strengthening it given the serious threat that is poised by coastal erosion and landslip to many of our coastal communities.

Root and Branch Review of all Services

We will undertake a root and branch review of all services, to determine areas of weakness, establish improvement programmes and to ensure that all statutory functions are adequately funded and performed.

It is expected that this review will take place over a period of at least 12 months and will cover all aspects of the Council's work. It will result in changes to the management structure of the Council that will ensure that the democratic process and democratic accountability are made central to everything we do.

Departmental reviews will look at delivery of services and the support provided to those operating on the front line to ensure that they are able to do their jobs without being frustrated OR hampered by a lack of administrative support.

Many of the cuts have been made from what are termed non-front line services. This misleads the public into thinking that important statutory functions are not damaged by what is being done.

In reality, the cuts to administrative roles have meant that front line staff have had to divert their time and energy to these roles, reducing their effectiveness, resulting in services that no longer do what they are supposed to do. Our root and branch review is designed to investigate this problem and introduce solutions to address any weaknesses identified.

We have a number of experienced Independent Councillors who have worked hard over the last four years to develop alternative budget strategies and

uncover ruling group policy and initiative deficiencies to expose these to the glare of public and media attention.

From this work we have identified a number of priority areas that urgently require attention. These include:

- **Education and Children's Services.**
- **Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing.**
- **Town & Parish Council Support and the Localism Act**
- **Assets – Public Custodian not Private Landlord**
- **Coastal Protection**
- **Environment, Climate Change & Self Sustainability**
- **Economy**
- **Highways**
- **Public Safety**
- **Voluntary and Third Sector Organisations**
- **Heritage and Culture**

An Independent Council

The Interim Administration

Because any new system of governance that we introduce will take at least six months to implement, initially it will be necessary to utilise the existing system of cabinet and scrutiny in the interim period, to deal with these priority areas. We undertake to do this in the spirit of the proposed new Independent system.

In accordance with the Island Independents' Promise, The Leader of the Council and all Cabinet Members will be elected by the full council to reflect the will of the whole Island.

The existing Cabinet Structure will be used to establish interim Committees, informal or formal depending on legal advice from Officers, under each new cabinet member.

Whilst the Leader and Cabinet Members will have the existing executive powers commensurate with the current constitution, they will engender the spirit of the proposed new structure and facilitate inclusive, open and transparent policy development within their Cabinet role and their associated committee.

This will ensure that the Bell principles and the promises made by Island Independents are engendered in the spirit of the interim administration.

The New Process

Any new process needs to be lawful and workable. It will be necessary to dedicate officer time to producing a new Constitution that enables the new framework to operate lawfully and effectively to translate ideas into policy and initiatives. For this reason it is not possible to provide a detailed outline of the new process here.

What we aim to develop is a process that will allow individual ward members to bring forward policy ideas and initiatives that can be discussed by the relevant committee, with input from experts and others, where appropriate.

The committee will then decide whether the matter should be investigated further or discounted, based on an open, transparent and publically visible assessment. If taken forward, the committee will investigate the matter in fine detail with the help of officers and together they will produce policy that can be placed before the Full Council and decided in an open vote. The committee will then take a scrutiny role in overseeing the implementation and the on-going progress of the policy.

This will not prevent individual members from choosing to bring matters to Full Council, but it may mean that, if agreed at Full Council, those matters are then referred back to the appropriate committee so that policy can be developed in the way described above before being brought back to Full Council for the final vote.

Conclusion

By the means described in this document we hope to get the Isle of Wight Council working, as it should, for the Isle of Wight, its visitors, businesses and residents, by providing and properly maintaining all those services the Council should be responsible for, for the benefit of all those who need them.

Authorship

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